“Natasha’s Immigrant Story: Three Worlds, Three Languages”

My immigrant story begins with my grandparents’ journey from Colombia to Chicago in 1966...

Mi abuelo tenía un trabajo bien pagado en Colombia, pero lo abandonó para ser un conductor de autobús en los estados unidos. Aunque tenía una vida muy comoda allá, la dejó para darle a sus hijos más oportunidades y facilidades en la vida. (Translation: My grandfather had a well-paying job in Colombia, but he gave that up to be a bus driver in the United States. He left their comfortable life there to give his children more opportunities and mobility in life.)

They stayed in the U.S. for a decade before returning to Colombia, where the climate was more forgiving and a broad network of family and friends awaited them. My father and his brother, however, were able to walk away with birthright American citizenship—something that would come to change the course of my father’s entire life.

He returned to America when he was 19, joining the U.S. Navy after barely passing the English aptitude test. He was eventually stationed in Yokosuka, Japan, where he met a local lady who would come to be my mother.

私は横須賀で生まれて、6 さいまで日本に住んでいました。横須賀に住んでいた間は、母の家族に囲まれて、子どものころの思い出は日本語に埋め込んであります。(Translation: I was born in Yokosuka and lived in Japan until I age six. While living there, I was surrounded by my mother’s family, so my childhood memories are buried in the Japanese language.)

When my father finished his term in the Navy, the three of us moved to St. Petersburg, Florida, so that he could start a career with the degree he’d earned while in service. We were alone in America, with no Japanese family and few Colombian relatives in the country. Speaking Japanese began to foster a sense of intimacy between my mother and me, sheltering us from the English-speaking world we had been thrown into. But the pressures for my family to assimilate were strong in our first years here.

English became more present in our household, and my Japanese skills began to dwindle. My Japanese self and its development felt thwarted in childhood, when I was ripped away from the culture that I had considered the core of my identity. A great uneasiness haunted me at the thought of becoming an American, of becoming part of a culture that closed me off when I first entered it. I had accepted my place as an outsider in America, but realizing that I was an outsider in Japan was too much to bear. It was, for lack of a better word, heartbreaking. I developed an intimacy with Japanese during my youth that I could not let go of. So after my most recent trip to Japan, I decided to give one last push against the forces of my fated Americanization by taking advanced Japanese classes at the University.
But this, in turn, brought up another dilemma—of whether or not to continue learning Spanish, the language of my father’s family. I feared the risk of pushing one language out of my brain by learning another. It felt as though I was being forced to choose between the two sides of my family. I didn’t want to turn my back on my Colombian heritage by focusing solely on Japanese. Therefore, in an attempt to be fair and nurture both fragments of my identity, I juggled both languages until I felt satisfied with my Spanish skills.

I began to see Japanese and Spanish as more than just languages. They became worlds in themselves, bridges to cultures, identities. Thus, I have come to realize that my identity, as my relationship with language, is fluid. Prior experiences with cultural and linguistic immersion have assured me that a language forgotten is not a language forever lost. My ethnicity is multiple and my identity as an immigrant to the United States remains flexible.